NIETZSCHE'S DANGEROUS GAME

Philosophy in the Twilight of the Idols

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

> And if a man today is praised for living "wisely" or "as a philosopher," it hardly means more than "prudently and apart." Wisdom – seems to the rabble a kind of escape, a means and trick for getting well out of a dangerous game. But the genuine philosopher – as it seems to *us,* my friends? – lives "unphilosophically" and "unwisely," above all *imprudently,* and feels the burden and the duty of a hundred attempts [*Versuchen*] and temptations [*Versuchungen*] of life – he risks *himself* constantly, he plays *the* dangerous game. (BGE 205)

This book undertakes a critical appraisal of the political philosophy that informs the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche from the period 1885–88. The interpretive task I have set for myself is twofold: First, I reconstruct the revised critique of modernity that Nietzsche develops in the writings of this period; second, I situate his post-Zarathustran political thinking within the self-referential context of his revised critique of modernity. My specific focus is the "symptomatological" critique of modernity that emerges in this period, from such writings as *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), *The Antichrist(ian)* (1888), *The Case of Wagner* (1888), and *Ecce Homo* (1888).

I focus on this fertile period of Nietzsche's philosophical career because it yields the clearest formulation of his mature political thinking, as evidenced by the unprecedented self-referential turning he undertakes therein. This turning is precipitated, I believe, by his growing awareness of the complicity of his earlier writings – such as *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) – in

the cultural malaise they presumed to treat. This period is furthermore bounded by two events of the utmost biographical importance: his belated completion of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in 1885 and his final departure from sanity in January of 1889.

My attention to the self-referential implications of Nietzsche's philosophy is not, in itself, novel. Friends and foes alike regularly detect a "problem" of self-reference in his critical project, noting that everything he says about his various "enemies" rebounds to discredit him as well.[1] This familiar criticism is essentially valid, inasmuch as he invariably implicates himself in his own critical tirades, but it need not prove fatal to his critique of modernity. Indeed, whereas most readers treat Nietzsche's problem of self-reference as vicious, as marking the philosophical limitations of an otherwise promising critical project, I take it as the starting point of my own investigation.

Nietzsche is the first serious critic of modernity to acknowledge his own complicity in the cultural crisis that he reveals and attempts to address. He understands not only that a philosophical confrontation with modernity must appeal to immanent standards of evaluation, but also that an immanent critique of modernity must also apply self-referentially to the critic who advances it. He has no idea, however, where his self-referential critique of modernity may lead or what conclusions it is likely to yield. Indeed, he cannot know such things, for he is in the worst possible position to evaluate objectively his own entanglements in the decadence of late modernity – hence the experimental spirit that animates his post-Zarathustran writings.

Once situated within the context of his confrontation with modernity, Nietzsche's political philosophy assumes a dramatically changed aspect. For example, this self-referential critique of modernity militates against the popular interpretation of Nietzsche as an unrepentant champion of the heroic will. While he may at one time have entrusted the redemption of modernity to a superhuman act of will, his writings from the period 1885–88 ridicule all such schemes, which invariably trade on an overestimation of the volitional resources available to agents who labor in the twilight of the idols. Modernity, he now believes, is an age beset by advanced decay, which can be neither reversed nor arrested. Any attempt to implement a political solution to the problem of modernity would only compound the decadence of modernity and possibly hasten its advance. Agents in late modernity, including Nietzsche himself, simply lack the volitional resources needed to orchestrate the redemption of the age.

My study draws its title from the passage I have summoned as the epigraph for this Introduction. Although Nietzsche says very little about these "genuine philosophers" and the "dangerous game" they play, his own post-Zarathustran confrontation with modernity provides us with an instructive example of both. To play the dangerous game is to open oneself to a degree

of critical scrutiny that one cannot direct toward oneself and thereby to place oneself voluntarily in the dismembering hands of one's most ruthless critics. Nietzsche's own rendition of the dangerous game comprises those experimental rhetorical strategies that he designs in order to neutralize or compensate for the crippling effects of his own decadence.

Desperately hoping to extend his meager influence into the next millennium, he deliberately cultivates a readership that must inevitably turn against him – hence the inherent danger of his dangerous game. If his teachings are to survive the duration of modernity, safeguarded for delivery (albeit in distorted form) to the mysterious "philosophers of the future," then he must recruit wily emissaries who can negotiate the shades and shadows of the fading epoch. Although more respectful readers are both available and willing, he believes that their weakness for discipleship betrays a fatal lack of cunning and guile.

In his own case, then, the danger in question is largely attributable to his reliance on a readership he can neither trust nor control. The readers he recruits may either fail to deliver his teachings to the philosophers of the future or distort his teachings beyond recognition. Any readers who are clever enough to shelter and disseminate his untimely teachings are also sufficiently independent – we might also say traitorous – to present their own interpretations of these teachings as authoritative. Such is the danger that he must court if he is to have the influence he desires on the founding of the successor age to modernity.

Although participation in the dangerous game is voluntary, and so strategic, Nietzsche can neither foresee nor manage the consequences of his experiments. Born of excess and expenditure, the results of this dangerous game must remain largely unknown to him, but not necessarily to the readers he has trained. Having adopted an indirect route to the completion of his task, he is powerless to determine the constituency of the readership to whom he entrusts his destiny. He can only hope that he has trained his successors well and that his books contain sufficient barbs and snares to waylay unworthy readers.[2] Although he prefers to depict the dangerous game as a heroic *agon* and his own participation as an exercise of surpassing bravado, his weakness for this anachronistic romance only confirms his inability to neutralize the decadence that binds him.

Nietzsche's failure to arrive at an accurate assessment of his own decay contributes an element of danger to which he remains utterly blind, thereby compounding the native perils of his dangerous game. The "formula of decadence," he explains, is "instinctively to choose what is harmful for *oneself*" (TI 9:35). As one might expect, his own decadence manifests itself as an instinctive (and unwitting) predilection for disciples, for fawning sycophants, and for deferential flatterers. As it turns out, then, his decadence prevents him from cultivating the "perfect readers" who might

deliver his teachings to the philosophers of the future. Although he wants to cultivate a heroic readership of intrepid Nietzscheans, what he needs is another matter altogether.

Indeed, despite his frequent disclaimers to the contrary, his post-Zarathustran writings evince an irrepressible anxiety of influence: He needs not only to be read, but also to be regarded, heeded, respected, revered, even idolized.[3] Vaguely aware that he is no match for the illustrious predecessors whom he arrogantly designates as his rivals, he worries to the end that he is both "too late" to salvage the remaining vital resources of modernity and "too early" to impress his stamp onto the successor epoch. Anxious that his place in history is by no means secure, he casts a reckless wager, gambling that he can somehow insulate his "children" from the decadence that besets him.

Nietzsche loses this desperate wager, but he may yet win the support of readers who are uniquely suited to the peculiar historical conditions of late modernity. Although he has failed to muster the swashbuckling warrior-genealogists to whom he hoped to entrust his teachings, he has apparently (and unwittingly) succeeded in training a revolutionary vanguard of decadent Nietzscheans, who are willing to betray even him in order to import his teachings into the next millennium. While he openly despaired of his apparent failure to found the communities of resistance that might preside over his posthumous birth as the Antichrist (EH:bge 1), his checkered reception in the twentieth century suggests that he may have been successful after all – albeit in ways unimaginable (and altogether unpalatable) to him.

Chapter 1 introduces my preferred method for reading Nietzsche against Nietzsche, such that we might extract from him the "personal confession" and "unconscious memoir" that his writings collectively essay in encrypted form. Chapters 2 and 3 attempt to reconstruct the general theory of decadence that informs his post-Zarathustran writings, focusing, respectively, on his parallel accounts of decadent souls and decadent peoples. Chapter 4 situates Nietzsche's (revised) critique of modernity within the general theory of decadence he advances, articulating his post-Zarathustran political thinking while implicating him in the moralization of decadence. Chapter 5 undertakes a critical assessment of his attempts to compensate for his besetting decadence, charting his participation (both voluntary and involuntary) in the dangerous game of parastrategesis. Chapter 6 examines his celebrated "revaluation of all values" and locates it within his complex scheme to declare war on Christian morality. Chapter 7 offers a critical appraisal of his war on Christianity, illuminating the unintended successes that may ensue from the failure of his revaluation of all values. Chapter 8 concludes the study with an evaluation of Nietzsche's cleverness, suggesting that his

ingenious (albeit failed) participation in the dangerous game of para-strategesis may bespeak the inspiration of *übermenschlich* genius.

Four preliminary caveats are in order. First of all, this book ventures no sustained interpretation of Nietzsche's favorite and most influential book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.* While I refer to the text of *Zarathustra* throughout my study, I make no attempt to collect these various references within a fully articulated interpretive framework.[4] I have restricted my interpretive focus to the fertile period 1885–88, which follows Nietzsche's completion of *Zarathustra* in quadrapartite form. In doing so, I have attempted to take quite seriously his suggestion that his post-Zarathustran books are "fish hooks" designed to land worthy readers for *Zarathustra* – although I reject his self-serving complaint that "*there were no fish*" (EH:bge 1). In this light, it is perhaps appropriate that we investigate Nietzsche's post-Zarathustran corpus before turning to *Zarathustra* itself.

Second, I occasionally avail myself in this book of textual evidence culled from Nietzsche's letters and unpublished notes. In light of the extraordinary hardships incurred by Nietzsche in steering his books into print, I take quite seriously the decisions he made to prepare a particular text for, or withhold it from, publication. I consequently refer to the unpublished notes only in the event that such notes embellish or clarify a point independently advanced in a published book. My references to his private correspondence are similarly circumscribed. I restrict my references to those notes and letters that shed light on his own intentions and impressions in the period 1885–88.

Third, I rely throughout this study on the excellent translations of Nietzsche's writings rendered by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. On those occasions when I deem necessary an alternative translation of my own design, I do so either to elicit the nuances of the passage in question or to correct for what I perceive to be an unwarranted domestication of Nietzsche's rhetorical excesses. For my translations of his private correspondence, I occasionally consult and draw from the fine translations provided by Christopher Middleton.[5]

Fourth, I have attempted throughout this study to confine my commentary on the secondary literature to the endnotes. Readers who wish not to become entangled in arcane philological and philosophical debates may safely restrict themselves to the body of the book itself.

Notes

1 Remarking on Nietzsche's attempts to orchestrate a "total revolution" in modernity, Bernard Yack concludes that "Nietzsche too must make a leap into the absurd, for the problem he seeks to resolve cannot be resolved without self-

contradiction." [*The Longing for Total Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 355].

2 Jacques Derrida documents Nietzsche's reliance on such barbs and snares in *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles,* trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), especially pp. 35–45.

3 Alexander Nehamas maintains that Nietzsche wants his writing to be a part of history, that the reader's agreement or disagreement is ultimately irrelevant to Nietzsche's aim of writing himself into history [*Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambrige, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), especially chapter 7]. See also Nehamas, "Different Readings: A Reply to Magnus, Solomon and Conway," *International Studies in Philosophy,* Vol. 21, No. 2, 1989, p. 79. Nehamas thus succeeds in saving Nietzsche from the charge of "dogmatism" (a charge that Nehamas takes much more seriously than Nietzsche ever did), but only at the expense of uncomplicating the twisted motives of a remarkably complicated and decadent philosopher. As I will argue throughout this study, Nietzsche was virtually consumed by the task of cultivating a specific type of reader who might continue his life's work. He certainly wants to write himself into history, but only (or primarily) as the destroyer of Christian morality and the founder of a postmodern, tragic age.

4 Incomplete statements of my interpretation of *Zarathustra* may be found in the following essays: "Solving the Problem of Socrates: Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* as Political Irony," *Political Theory,* Vol. 16, No. 2, May 1988, pp. 257–280; "Nietzsche *contra* Nietzsche: The Deconstruction of *Zarathustra,*" in *Nietzsche as Postmodernist,* ed. Clayton Koelb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 91–110, 304–311; "A Moral Ideal for Everyone and No One," *International Studies in Philosophy,* Vol. 22, No. 2, 1990, pp. 17–30. For a superbly philological interpretation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* see Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche's Teaching* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

5 *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche,* trans. and ed. Christopher Middleton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).